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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000108

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: AMBASSADOR FAREWELL CALL ON LEBANESE ARMY  
COMMANDER

BEIRUT 00000108 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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11. (C) In a January 12th farewell office call, a confident Lebanese Army Commander Michel Sleiman discussed the ongoing investigation of General Francois Al-Hajj's assassination, the current political impasse, a new but improbable Presidential candidate, and his mandatory resignation date as Army Commander. End Summary.

12. (C) Ambassador and Defense Attache met with Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Lieutenant General Michel Sleiman on December 19 at LAF headquarters in Yarze. LAF Lieutenant Colonel Edmond Homsy also attended from the Lebanese side. The atmosphere of the meeting was upbeat and cordial.

NO NEW INFORMATION ON ASSASSINATION  
OF GENERAL FRANCOIS HAJJ  
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13. (S) Ambassador asked if there was any new information on the assassination of LAF Major General Francois Hajj. Sleiman said that he had spoken with LF G-2 BG Georges Khoury that morning and that there was no new information. In fact, the photos taken as part of the investigation are being sent to France for analysis by UNIIC. Sleiman regretfully informed Ambassador that it was unlikely that new information would be forthcoming because "the deep division in politics makes the work of intelligence services very hard." Just at that moment, a "tock-tock" sound emanating behind the head of Sleiman made everyone in the room chuckle nervously about who might be listening. Sleiman assured us saying, "no, no don't worry about that." Returning to the subject of General Hajj, Sleiman told us cited a Lebanese proverb that loosely translates as "stay away from the problem." No one wants to get involved and everyone wants to blame the other side. With this atmosphere, it is unlikely that the true story will emerge as these investigations require the stories of many, many people. Additionally, the stories they have heard lead them to the Palestinian Camps, a large "resistance" area and a difficult Syrian border area.

ANY CHANCE OF ELECTIONS NEXT WEEK?  
NO WAY, I AM SURE.  
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14. (S) Sleiman had no illusions that the elections scheduled for Monday 1/21 would take place (and Sleiman was subsequently proven correct). In fact, Sleiman believes that the elections are still very far away in terms of timing. Sleiman's more immediate concern is the vicious attack by Sleiman Frangieh against the Patriarch Boutros Sfeir recently. Sleiman assessed that the attack is based on a perception that the patriarch and the LAF have a pact to elect a new president and start a third Christian party in Lebanon.

15. (S) Sleiman feels that all of these attacks and delaying tactics are, in fact, the end game for the opposition. By his calculation, the opposition does not want him to become president because of the threat of a third party that would not be beholden to them, since he would become president by virtue of March 14 support. For this reason, the odious name of Faris Bouez is now being forwarded by Hizbullah and Syria as a candidate. (Comment: The creation of a third party headed by Sleiman, presumably independent of any Hizbullah alliance, would certainly damage Hizbullah's attempts to gain a parliamentary majority, as Sleiman would pull many Maronites away from Aoun in a parliamentary contest. Thus, Hizbullah is in a quandary: they want to support Michel Sleiman as a protector of the "resistance," but they cannot

square this with their other political imperative of winning a majority in the next parliamentary election. End Comment.

I AM LEAVING THE ARMY ON NOVEMBER 21, 2008  
IT IS A MANDATORY REQUIREMENT  
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BEIRUT 00000108 002.2 OF 003

16. (S) Sleiman reminded us that he must, by law, depart the post of Army Commander no later than November 21, 2008. The Army Commander is allowed to stay for one year past the end of a President's term in office. This one year period is designed to allow for a new Army Commander to be selected and confirmed by a new cabinet. No action is required for Sleiman to leave. It would require a Cabinet decision for him to stay on past this date.

17. (S) Already looking to his political future, Sleiman said his departure would allow him to run for parliament in 2009 as he needs six months between retirement from the Army and running for public office. If required, Sleiman will leave the Army some weeks earlier in order to meet the requirements to compete in the 2009 parliamentary elections.

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE ARMY  
TWO SCENARIOS  
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18. (S) If Sleiman is elected as the president, there will still be a period of time when there is no Army Commander. It is unlikely that the Cabinet formation process will go smoothly or quickly, thus prolonging the period of time where there is no Army Commander. Sleiman is not worried about this possibility as he has complete confidence in MinDef Elias Murr, Army Chief Staff Major General Shawki Al-Masri, a Druse, and his relationship with both of these men. Sleiman feels that the Army will not experience any problems in this scenario.

19. (S) Later in the meeting, Sleiman re-affirmed his comfort with MinDef Murr, recounting three and a half years of cooperation and coordination with him. "I have an easy way to speak with him." Sleiman explained how each of them understood their roles and how they worked together to get measures related to the Army passed in the Cabinet.

110. (S) The more worrisome scenario, according to Sleiman, is if his mandatory retirement date comes and he is not elected president and there is no president. At this time, there will be no one to look out for Maronite interests in the government. Sleiman said that Hizbullah also fears this scenario and they would want him to stay in the job. "They don't help my election, but they want me here. It is contradictory. I think I will ask for a long vacation."

AMR MOUSSA VISIT  
"NOTHING HAPPENED"  
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111. (S) Ambassador asked Sleiman his views on Amr Moussa's recent trip and the prospects for future engagement. Sleiman dispassionately responded, "nothing happened, all sides tell me there was no progress." The only exception was Amr Moussa who claimed that there was progress.

112. (S) Sleiman was not comfortable with Amr Moussa's proposal of abandoning Article 65 in the constitution and to insist that all cabinet decisions be taken by consensus. In Sleiman's view, this would completely undermine the role of the presidency as one minister would have more power than the president. Sleiman simply stated, "this is not a good idea."

PHONE CALL FROM DAMASCUS  
FARIS BOUEZ IS THEIR CHOICE  
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112. (S) Never far from a cell phone, Sleiman took a call from Michel Murr, MinDef Murr's father, during our meeting. According to Murr, the word from Damascus is that there is good news. The meeting between Assad, the Qataris, the Germans and the Turks left everyone with a feeling of optimism in Damascus -- and the name of Faris Bouez was again trotted out for comment. "I still say no" replied Sleiman, dismissing Murr's optimism about Sleiman's chances. Sleiman feels that Amr Moussa may be amenable to Bouez as they are close personal friends going back many years.

BERRI WANTS SLEIMAN FOR PRESIDENT  
BUT HE CANNOT BREAK FREE OF HIS MASTERS

BEIRUT 00000108 003.2 OF 003  
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113. (S) Ambassador told Sleiman that he had seen Speaker Berri two days prior and that Berri had expressed his support for Sleiman. "Yes, yes, but he is not free to break from Hizbullah," replied Sleiman. Sleiman recounted the story where Berri promised that all the ministers would come back to the Cabinet when Sleiman was selected as the consensus candidate: with the Shia ministers present, the cabinet, recognized by all as legitimate, would be able to amend

Lebanon's constitution to permit Sleiman to become president. Easy. Then, on November 27, when March 14th's Ammar Houry leaked to the press that Sleiman was their candidate, this all changed. Now, according to Sleiman, "the Syrian interference is hard."

¶14. (S) Asked if he thought there was direct coordination between Aoun and Syria now, Sleiman said, "yes, but only over the last one or two weeks."

PLANNED PROTESTS IN LEBANON  
SLEIMAN SENDS A STRONG MESSAGE TO NASRALLAH  
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¶15. (S) Open press has been reporting planned strikes and demonstrations by the opposition on 1/24 and 1/28. In light of these plans, Sleiman told us he had sent a very strong message to Hizbullah's Hassan Nasrallah the day before. Specifically, Sleiman told Nasrallah that it was not in his interests to have a problem with the Army or anyone else. "If you think you can substitute this clash (elections) and replace them with clashes in the Christian areas, it will not work. These clashes could be converted to clashes between you and the Sunnites." Sleiman stressed that he gave this message to Nasrallah as the Army Commander and not as a political candidate. "I am still the Army Commander. If they want to demonstrate, they need to coordinate."

I ONLY HAVE TEN MORE MONTHS  
MAYBE I'LL COME TO AMERICA  
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¶16. (S) In a somber, yet playful tone, Sleiman reminded us that he only has ten months left as Army Commander. Sleiman told Ambassador that if he is not elected by that time that, "I will ask for political asylum in the USA because people want to kill me. I prefer to leave the country."

¶17. (S) Asked if he had any messages for Washington, Sleiman asked for continued friendship, cooperation and leadership from America. He also stressed that Washington must remember the role of the Christians in Lebanon and continue to support them. In his words, "without Christians, there is no Lebanon."

FELTMAN